

Welcome to hello NC, stories from Main Street. I'm your host, Karl Galloway. The small town Main Street is a center of commerce, community and history. Not necessarily of a bygone era, many main drags are bustling with new creative energy. Come along as we explore our local treasures and talk with the artists, farmers, foodies, and dedicated citizens of North Carolina's Main Street towns. You might just find yourself planning a visit.

Elkin, North Carolina is a town of roughly 4,000 inhabitants, located at the foothills of the Appalachians, half an hour from the Virginia border. In the 1870s Chatham Blanket gave Elkin a reputation for textiles, at one point becoming the largest blanket manufacturer in the world. Despite more than a 100 years of ownership the company went bankrupt in 1992, echoing similar stories of industry gone across North Carolina. The factory buildings now stand largely empty, weeds poking up through shards of glass under broken windows. Elkin's downtown, once known for a lively cruising scene, was quiet.

Seeking a new reputation for their town, it was a group of dedicated walkers who sewed together their passion for hiking, elkin's nature, and an unfunded mandate to build Elkin's reputation as a trail town, one where the famous Mountain to Sea Trail runs, literally, down Elkin's Main Street.

The Elkin Valley Trails Association has become a cornerstone in the Elkin community, bringing people together through a common goal of creating and maintaining a higher quality of life while boosting the local economy.

Bob: Hello?

Karl: Hi Bob, this is Karl.

B: Hi Karl. I just picked up my phone.

K: How are you?

B: I'm well, how are you?

I spoke with Bob Hillyer, whose hiking resume includes two tours of the Camino de Santiago, a network of european walking trails leading to northwestern spain. Bob has been an integral part in recognizing and utilizing the mandate of Howard Lee that stated a desire and wish for a trail to stretch across the state. Because large stretches of the trail go through private lands, it relies on easements of landowners who wish to leave a legacy by volunteering a piece of their property as a connector. The trail passes near Elkin and in effect a simple but transformative decision was made to route the trail through Elkin's main street. Over the course of 9 years, elkin has become home to several air bnb's, new businesses, campgrounds, and community catering to hikers who, roughly a third of the way through the trail, are ready for a shower and a beer. Elkin is a great example of how local assets can be leveraged for economic and social benefit, it's safe to say that this initiative has legs.

B: My name is Bob Hillyer, I am retired and working on the Mountains to the Sea Trail, uh, through Elkin Valley Trails association. I'm what is called the trail development manager.

K: And what is the Elkin Valley Trail Association, in general?

B: The Elkin Valley Trail Association started in 2011, and it was an outcome of people of people trying to find a direction for elkin. Elkins major manufacturer, Chatham Blanket, who employed 3000 people and the Elkin furniture plant which had about 900 people both closed down so it was much like a lot of small textile towns, very little to go on. We have a unique situation here where 3 major sanctioned trails come

together in Elkin. One of them is the mountain to sea trail, which is sanctioned by the state of north carolina, the over mountain victory trail is sanctioned by the federal government. It follows the route of the patriots, down over kings mountain, the battle of kings mountain in the revolutionary war. 3rd trail is the Yadkin Bluewater trail, which is the first sanctioned trail by North Carolina. It follows the Yadkin River and is basically a canoe trail or a kayaking trail. So, we had the makings of what would be a great location for a trail town.

K: And what is a trail town? Talk a little bit about what that means.

B: Probably the best known trail town is Damascus Virginia. And in Damascus they have a couple trails that come together. Most notably the Appalachian Trail. They also have trail days where they'll have 10000 hikers come in at one time. They have numerous outfitters there. The trail goes through the hikers can stay at hostels. It's built all around the trails basically. And I think that's the way elkin is sort of heading. We had 2 outfitters on the Yadkin river before elkin valley trails started up. Now we have 7. We had no campground, now we have 3 campgrounds. We had no vacation houses here, now the last time I looked we had 28 vacation houses plus many air bns rented out.

K: And that's over a period of how long?

B: 9 years.

K: 9 years, that's been the turnaround.

B: Primarily because of the trails.

K: As part of that you're working on, or have you already redirected the mountain to sea trail down main street, is that correct?

B: That's correct.

K: What was that process like, a long one maybe?

B: Well, not everybody appreciated the way we did it but in 1977 a man named Howard Lee was with the department of Natural Resources. He had a speech in lake junaluska where he said he would like to have a trail from one end of the state to the other. Now the problem with that is he also said he had no intentions of asking the legislature for you know, millions of dollars for funding for this trail and in fact, I've got a little quote here from Asheville Citizen Times from that speech. He says "I would depend upon 99 per cent of the trail to be established through cooperation of state, federal, local agencies and the assistance of individual and corporate landowners willing to give an easement over a small portion of their land as a legacy to future generations." The reason I'm saying this is it's a great idea to have the mountain to sea trail but it's an unfunded mandate. For the past 40 years they've been putting in trail but 99 per cent of that trail has been on public lands. The Blue Ridge Parkway, the Uwharries, several of those state parks, Hanging Rock, Pilot Mountain, falls lake. They're all public lands and that's where the MST is now. The problem that we have is how do you get across the private lands. From stone mountain to pilot mountain is all private land. There were a couple guides that came out. Scott Ward published one about 10 years ago, which brought the trail from Pilot Mountain to Dobson to Mountain Park to Stone Mountain. Alan Diehardt published one that followed that route. The state said that you should go down roaring river, to the yadkin river. Several of us, because

we know the area knew that there are 2 special features that the trail needed to go over. One of them was Well's Knob, which is a promontory which sticks up maybe 800 feet up in the air, it goes up to 1800 feet. Uh, we got permission from the major landowner to put the trail across that. The second one was just outside of Elkin, called Carter Falls. And Carter Falls is a 60 foot waterfall, no one even knew it was here. The landowner had had it for decades. And had it all posted "No trespassing," and it was just outside of Elkin by trail it's only 7 miles. Both of those directed the trail to Elkin, so we with EVTA looked at these different routes that people had and we said no, you want to hit Well's Knob, you want to hit Carter Falls, that is a straight line right down to Elkin. We also had a old railroad bed that followed almost that route, which makes a perfect trail, particularly an urban trail. It makes a nice wide, hard path. Doesn't flood, very level. Several of those things fell right into where the railroad bed would take you right into main street. The other reason why we wanted to do this is many people will start at Clingmans dome on the Tennessee border. When you get to elkin you've done about 340 miles. If you've ever done any long distance hiking you find that going for a month in the woods, all the time, it's pretty refreshing to all of a sudden walk down the main strip of Elkin and you can buy ice cream here or you can get new clothes here or you can wash your clothes here. From a strategic standpoint we are about a third of the way through. You know, right at the foothills, going right through Elkin, you can see the joy in people's faces when they say oh I can get a beer! You know.

K: Or a burger!

B: Yeah, yeah. So uh we've got main street, they walk right down main street. We've got uh stenciled Mountains to Sea Trail on either side of

the road on the sidewalks. The town actually stepped in, bought an old building, remodeled it, made a beautiful building out of it and we call it the trail and heritage center. Or at least I do, some people call it the heritage and trail center. Anyway we actually put lockers in there, and we put showers for the hikers to use. And we convinced the town to let any through hikers to tent camp in the local park down by the the river where there's baths if they need, or bathrooms. And what we're finding is that we have a bunch of people who we call trail angels. And when we learn that somebody is coming through, or a through hiker is coming through we kind of fight on who's gonna put them up for the night, who's gonna buy them lunch and of course the local brewery will give them a free beer when they come through.

K: So it's a real community energy, a real community vibe.

B: It really is. And it uh, that's what's happened with the trail. Just revitalized elkin and given it a purpose, and people love it. Of course in this Covid our trails have tripled in use. I'm sure you've had that at all the national parks are full and stone mountain closes down between 10 and 11 and they look on their map trails and they see our trails so they come down. We've got trails that take them to vineyards, where they can have a glass of wine and then walk, stumble back to their car. We've got trails to the craft brewers also.

K: are there any lessons that you have learned through this process that you think are transferrable to other communities who may want to develop a local asset. I know that yours is maybe a specific situation but any general lessons for those communities?

B: Certainly, first of all, it's like a business, you have to differentiate yourself. You have to say what makes your town different than everybody else. We sort of said there were 2 things around here. We've got 40 vineyards within a 30 minute drive of Elkin. That's one big differentiation. Uh, the second is the trails. And as far as the trails go I think it's an opportunity for some of these small towns. And this is why. I spoke about the trail being an unfounded mandate and we're trying to work through private lands. And that's been a big stonewall trying to make more progress for the mountain to sea trail. If you're a small town and the Mountains to Sea trail is in your area, if you start building trail where there's only roadwork now, cause people do walk the road and from Elkin to Pilot Mountain there's a lot of road walk. If you're a small town along there and you start putting in trail, they'll move the mountain to sea trail through your town or along your trails. Because it's basically an unfunded mandate. So if someone puts in trails that are nearby, go for it. But a small town. Elkin was saying we've got heritage here or history here. All small towns have heritage. And all small towns have history. What do you have different. And there's got to be something. Just look around, look around.

K: What trail is your favorite, around Elkin? Where do you go when you walk out of your house and decide you want to take a walk?

B: I like the Grassy Creek Trail. It starts at Grassy Creek Vineyard. The folks there have just been wonderful. It goes down, crosses a creek and you have a choice; you can go right and take the Klondike trail, one of the most beautiful trails we have and we have dedicated it as a forest bathing trail. Forest bathing is basically going into nature, disconnecting your technology, turn off your cellphone, put your earbuds away and use your five senses and just listen. Listen to the babbling creek or the birds,

leaves, or looking around and seeing everything using your sight and senses. You can even smell the pine that you go through and the rhododendron. It's just a beautiful trail what we call the forest bathing trail. But if you take a left instead of a right it takes you up to the mountain to sea trail. And the mountain to sea trail goes for about a mile and a half to Carter falls. This is that 60 foot waterfall that nobody knew about and about 2 years ago we convinced the state of north carolina to buy it from the land owner. So it's in state hands now and we're in the process of building a suspension bridge across the creek so we can get easily to the other side and on up to stone mountain with the mountain to sea trail. So that's what we call the grassy creek trail. It's got a lot of, a couple spur trails off of it. But, that's my favorite.

K: You've given a lot of wonderful reasons to visit elkin and some wonderful things that are happening in elkin including the nature and the trail culture. Why would you say someone should visit elkin as opposed to say Asheville or some of the larger or more well known destinations in the area, or just to give a general welcome to elkin. How would you phrase that and how would you put that?

B: I think you've got the small, the small town feel here. We were at a trail head just the other day and a guy had a problem with his car and we happened to be going by and called up to the local mechanic place and he comes down there and fixes it right on the spot. That type of feel. The feel that everybody loves. One thing that we do that I think is essential of why this is such a popular trail town is everything is volunteer. When you have a big city and you build a greenway all the way around it's beautiful greenway but it doesn't have the same feel as elkin. Elkin we have trails and people came out there with shovels and rakes and hoes and actually put the trail in. They're very proud of it. You don't see any



trash around. We have trail maintainers that go every month and they'll walk the trail. Sometimes every day. And they pick up the trash and say looks like a tree fell down or we've got some erosion here. And they get in touch with Elkin Valley Trails and we have a workday and we go out. It's all volunteer. So we feel like "hey we own this, we're proud of this." Whereas if you're in a larger metropolitan area with greenways it's just a different feel. People stop here and talk to you on the trails and ask you how you're doing and so forth. Difference between big city and small town.

K: Well Bob, listen thank you so much for your time. I'm looking forward to visiting Elkin and I hope to see you there.

B: Ok, thank you!